

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L LONDON 00279

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PDEV, UK(NI)

SUBJECT: NORTHERN IRELAND: POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

REF: LONDON 0278

1. HMG STEPPED UP ITS EFFORTS TO IMPROVE THE NI POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE IN PREPARATION FOR THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION ELECTIONS, WHICH ARE EXPECTED TO OCCUR IN MARCH, WHEN NI SECRETARY REES BEGAN A SERIES OF INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS WITH LEADERS OF ALL POLITICAL PARTIES REPRESENTED IN THE LAST STORMONT ASSEMBLY. THE JANUARY 8 PRESS, HOWEVER, REPORTS REES' FIRST MEETING WITH REV. IAN PAISLEY ENDED IN CONFRONTATION. ACCORDING TO THE PRESS, THE REES/PAISLEY DIALOGUE FOUNDERED ON THE QUESTION OF HMG'S DEALINGS ("NEGOTIATIONS" PER PAISLEY) WITH THE PROVISIONAL IRA IN CONNECTION WITH THE CURRENT CEASE FIRE. FURTHER DETAILS OF THEIR MEETING CONFLICT: NI OFFICE SPOKESMEN CLAIM PAISLEY WALKED OUT ON REES, WHILE PAISLEY SAYS REES "WENT COMPLETELY BESERK" AND LEFT PAISLEY SITTING ALONE IN STORMONT CASTLE.

2. IN A RELATED DEVELOPMENT, UNIONIST COALITION MP ENOCH POWELL JANUARY 7 TOLD A CONSTITUENCY MEETING THAT THERE

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IS CURRENTLY MORE HOPE FOR A SOLUTION TO THE NI PROBLEM

THAN AT ANY TIME IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS. ACCORDING TO THE PRESS, POWELL SPECIFICALLY PRAISED THE GOVERNMENT FOR ITS CURRENT SECURITY POLICY, ESPECIALLY ITS SUPPORT FOR THE ROYAL ULSTER CONSTABULARY, AND ITS "ABANDONMENT" OF THE SUNNINGDALE AGREEMENT (WE ASSUME HE WAS REFERRING TO HMG'S APPARENT RETREAT FROM THE "IRISH DIMENSION" REQUIREMENT). THE POWELL SPEECH WAS DISTRIBUTED TO LONDON MEDIA IN ADVANCE, BUT REPORTEDLY TOOK HIS UNIONIST ALLIES BY SURPRISE.

3. COMMENT: THE REES/PAISLEY MEETING WAS NOT A PROMISING START FOR THE POLITICAL DIALOGUE INITIATIVE. PAISLEY, WHO IN RECENT WEEKS HAS CONSISTENTLY TAKEN MORE EXTREME POSITIONS IN PUBLIC THAN OTHER UNIONIST MPS, EVIDENTLY TRIED TO USE HIS MEETING WITH REES TO STRENGTHEN HIS CLAIM TO LEADERSHIP OF THE UNIONIST COALITION. IN THIS CASE, HOWEVER, HE MAY HAVE MISREAD THE PUBLIC MOOD, WHICH HAS CHANGED DRAMATICALLY SINCE THE CEASE FIRE (REF-TEL AND BELFAST A-1). ACCORDINGLY, THE REES/PAISLEY CONFRONTATION NEED NOT NECESSARILY PREJUDICE THE OUTCOME OF THE POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS. CLEARLY, POWELL, WHO IN BRITAIN EXHIBITED A KEEN ABILITY TO SENSE SHIFTS IN PUBLIC OPINION, BELIEVES THE WINDS OF CHANGE ARE BLOWING IN ULSTER. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HIS SPEECH WILL NOT BE LOST ON OTHER UNIONIST POLITICIANS, AND COULD HELP THEM RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO OUTDO PAISLEY'S DEMAGOGY. TAKEN TOGETHER, THE REES INITIATIVE AND THE POWELL SPEECH REPRESENT ANOTHER POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT IN ULSTER, THOUGH SOLUTION TO THIS PROBLEM REMAINS A LONG WAY OFF. END COMMENT.

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